

Death by Suburb sermon series

#4 – Friendship: What Can You Do for Me?

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I heard about an article recently in USA Today that reported the results of a study by the American Sociological Review. The researchers concluded that American adults have fewer friends than a generation ago, and increasingly fewer confidantes. Twenty-five percent of those surveyed said they had zero close friends. For those few who do have confidantes, 80% turn to family, and are less likely to count on friends from clubs, neighborhoods, or social and religious organizations. The report said the chief causes for these trends are longer working hours, less time for socializing, and living in the suburbs.

How could living in the suburbs work against friendships? That's what we're going to explore today as we continue our "Death by Suburb" sermon series, in which we're looking at ways we can continue to grow spiritually in a suburban environment which often works against us.

One of the things I regret about moving so much when I was growing up was that I never really had a chance to make true childhood friends. My wife still gets together with women she knew in grade school, but I can barely remember the names of my elementary school friends.

I hope that's going to be different for my girls. I'm already seeing that my daughter Sydney is developing close relationships with several of the girls in our neighborhood. I see kids like Brooke and Brianna so often that I'm beginning to wonder if we didn't adopt them while I was away at a conference.

But like all friendships, these girls go through ups and downs. Syd will come in one day after school with a pitiful look on her face and announce that she and Brianna will never be friends again because of something Brianna said. Five minutes later, the doorbell rings – guess who – and Sydney is skipping out the door to go ride bikes with Brianna.

If only making and keeping friends were so easy when we get to be adults. On the contrary, I think once you reach a certain point in life it becomes extremely difficult to make new friends, because making friends takes an investment of time, and that's a commodity we feel we have very little of. I can certainly relate to the fact that I put so much time into my job and my family that when it comes time for developing and nurturing friendships, I don't have much to give.

And that, I believe is the crux of the issue of friendship in the suburbs. In the Public Speaking class I teach, we talk about a way of understanding human interaction called the Transactional Model of Communication. When you think of a transaction, you think of an exchange, like giving the cashier money in exchange for your purchase. In interpersonal communication, we are exchanging information and feedback. You give me a piece of information, I give you a quizzical look or a head nod or a yawn. A transaction has taken place.

That consumer metaphor for communication extends to our suburban friendships. We exist in transactional relationships, and so often our friendships are based upon a transactional model of relating. What do I have to offer the other person? And more importantly, what do they have to offer me?

I have seen this played out time and time again since moving to this area. Here's an example: For many of us, our adult relationships are facilitated by our kids. If our kids are on the same sports team or in the same play group, we become friends through proximity and convenience. And those friendships work fine, as long as the kids are getting along and the team is winning. But as soon as it's your kid who strikes out to end the game, or is teaching the others how to eat paste, the nature of those relationships changes. We no longer have value to the other person.

I believe we are conditioned to look for the benefits in all our relationships. Time is such a precious commodity that we don't want to waste it on just anybody for just any reason. If I'm going to invest time in you, I want some return on that investment, I want to know it's going to be worth my while to be your friend.

In suburban friendships, often that return is measured in the social capital a friend adds to our lives. It feels good to have dinner or attend a party or walk with someone in the "in" crowd. And you can't convince me that "in" crowds only exists in high school. I would argue that we often look at friendships with an eye toward what value they can add to our lives. Your economic status or nice house build me up and make me feel good about myself, so I'll be your friend.

But I would question whether such a transaction relationship is actually friendship. There's a difference between being friendly and being friends. One psychologist defined a friendship as "two people who demonstrate an irrational commitment to each other's well-being." The key is an "irrational commitment," meaning we'll do stupid, crazy, sacrificial things for each other. How many people in our lives would we say are irrationally committed to us?

Let me go back to the study I mentioned at the beginning that talked about the lack of confidantes. In a meeting recently I heard a man tell about a prominent friend of his who committed suicide. The man said his friend's suicide note still haunts him to this day, because in it his friend said, "In my darkest hour, I didn't have anyone to call." The man said he and his friend had many dinners together, played tennis together, attended baseball games together. He thought they were friends. But maybe they were just friendly, because when it became a matter of life and death, the friend had no one to call. We can't use relationships to position ourselves in life, then be disappointed when those relationships disintegrate the minute life starts to fall apart.

For me, that gets at the heart of the issue here. As I said a couple weeks ago, we suburbanites work very hard at image management. We don't want anyone to know that we don't have it all together, so we go out of our way to put on the façade of a well-adjusted, normal existence, when we know deep down in our hearts that such an existence doesn't exist.

We are so afraid that if we get too close that people will see our weaknesses, so we keep our distance. We remain friendly. The irony is that it is often those very weaknesses we share in common that bring us close together as friends. C.S. Lewis says friendship is born at the moment when one person says to another, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one!"

I wonder how many people in suburbia are lonely because they feel they are the only one. The only one unhappy in their marriage, the only one fighting an addiction, the only one still grieving a loss. Chances are there is a person out there right now who has absolutely nothing to offer us but loyal friendship, and it's sad to think that we've been

taught to believe that's simply not enough to merit the investment of our time and our selves.

I'm so thankful God thinks differently than us. I imagine it would be easy for God to look at us and determine we have very little to offer Him. It would have been quite easy for God to leave us to our own devices instead of reaching out to us. But not only did he not turn away, he turned toward us by sending us his Son to die for us. That, my friends, is irrational commitment to our well-being. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

The risk we take in living a transactional model of friendship is that we can apply that same understanding to our relationship with Christ. Instead of accepting the gift of grace we are offered, we can begin to ask, "What can you do for me?" If I give a pledge, if I serve on the Board, if I sing all the verses of the hymn on Sunday, what do I get in return? We begin to expect some kind of return on our investment, forgetting that we've already been paid back 100-fold through Christ's death and resurrection.

A 12<sup>th</sup>-century monk said, "The best companion of friendship is reverence," which means that a characteristic of a true friendship is that each person in it realizes how lucky they are simply to be the other person's friend. There is an indescribable joy in being with someone with whom you don't feel compelled to add value. True friends are accepted, not for the value of what they add, but for the value of who they are. After all, that's how we are accepted by our God.

I wonder who would be our friends – and who would no longer be our friends – if we defined our friendships that way? In the Old Testament, after Job's life falls apart around him, his three friends come to pick him apart, telling him all the things he did wrong to bring on this disaster. I wonder, if our lives fall apart, who'll be there to pick us apart, and who'll be there to help us pick up the pieces? I wonder, if it came right down to it, if we'd have someone to call? It starts with the words of the Bible: "And all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved." Are we investing the time needed to cultivate a true friendships with Jesus, or are we just being friendly? May our friendship with Jesus continue to grow deeper and be reflected in our friendships with each other.